Humanising Language Teaching

Peer Interaction: Beliefs of Primary English Learners and Implications for the Classroom

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Introduction

Learning a language at any age depends on the 'feel-good' factor, but the motivation that results from enjoyment and having fun in the language classroom is of particular importance for young learners, who still have many years of studies ahead before they become proficient. One way to engage young learners and engender positive emotions towards the language is to provide opportunities for them to 'show what they know,' both to their teacher and parents, by harnessing their natural aptitude for oral communication. As noted by Dunn (2013), children expect to be able to say something in the target language as soon as they start learning, and may become demotivated when they realise they can't.

In addition to this motivational factor, there are other benefits of speaking, and there is now a considerable body of work which supports claims that interaction, and peer interaction in particular, benefit language learning. Studies show how primary children can support their partner's output by offering help and encouragement, seeking and providing assistance and taking part in collective scaffolding (Gagné and Parks, 2013; Oliver et al., 2017). It has also been suggested that peer interaction in the primary context provides an occasion for learners to "grapple with the target language at a more challenging level" (Philp & Duchesne, 2008, p. 12) and affords learners the opportunity to interact with others at a similar level of cognitive and social development, thereby benefiting them socially, academically and culturally (Oliver and Philp, 2014).

However, although there is a clear case for the benefits of peer interaction for learning, we still have little insight into which activities children enjoy, how aware they are of the strategies they use to support their partner, and what they believe they learn from oral interaction. Nonetheless, there are distinct advantages for both learners and teachers of a better insight into learners' beliefs, as a conscious focus on the learning process on the part of the learner can encourage them to reflect on how they learn, and enable them to become more autonomous learners. Similarly, a more comprehensive understanding of how students believe they learn, enables teachers to more effectively guide learning behaviours (Andrews, 2007). The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of primary English learners' beliefs in relation to peer interaction in the foreign language classroom, focusing on their awareness of what they perceive they learn, and how they believe they give and receive support during peer interaction.

The paper starts by giving a brief overview of the theory related to the topic and goes onto present and discuss the results of a questionnaire, focusing on the implications for teaching. It ends with a brief conclusion of the main findings and proposes further areas of teacher intervention.

Background

Although English is taught to ever more learners in primary education globally, inadequate teacher education, leading to a lack of appropriately trained professionals, can result in ineffective classroom practices (Zein, 2019), with many teachers worldwide still using a teacher-centred approach. In such classes, language is presented to passive students who are expected to learn discreet items through repetition or other controlled practice activities.

However, the benefits of learner-centred classrooms, where learners are seen as active participants, have been posited for many year (Tudor, 1993). One feature of learner-centredness is that learners are expected to take more responsibility for their learning, leading to greater learner autonomy, which can be defined as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3), and which is believed to improve the quality of language learning inside the classroom, and also enable students to be more effective learners outside class. There is a growing understanding by educational authorities that developing learning to learn skills is of key importance in our globalised world (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015). Learning to learn "aims to focus the child's attention on what they are doing – and why – in order to develop their awareness of the learning process and better understand *how* they learn in addition to *what* they learn" (Ellis & Ibrahim 2015, p.9). This can be achieved when the teacher guides children's awareness and understanding of how they learn by asking them to reflect on learning activities. According to Ellis and Ibrahim (2015), metacognitive awareness, that is, knowing about knowing, is composed of a number of strands, some of which are language awareness, cognitive awareness and social awareness. Encouraging young learner reflection prompts them to develop language awareness, as it encourages them to develop a greater understanding of the language itself. Similarly, it fosters cognitive awareness by affording the opportunity to consider the strategies used to complete a task, and it promotes social awareness by helping learners understand how to interact and cooperate with others. This process of self-reflection can therefore help develop children's understanding of themselves as language learners. However self-reflection is also important for the teacher, because only by understanding learners' perceptions of their learning and their opinions of the learning process can the teacher effectively plan lessons and create a successful learning environment in the classroom. Teachers who ignore learners' beliefs about learning run the risk of negatively influencing students' engagement with learning tasks and learner motivation.

Results of a study on primary children's learner awareness by Chamot and El-Dinary (1999) showed that 3rd and 4th year foreign language learners in immersion classrooms were aware of the strategies they used for reading and writing tasks, and could describe their learning processes in some detail. Kolb's study (2014) on primary children's learning beliefs in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes in Germany showed that the 8-9 year olds in her study were aware of their learning processes, and that their beliefs about foreign language learning were similar to those of adults. Muñoz (2014) carried out a longitudinal study on awareness of young EFL learners in Spain and found that over a period of six years, primary children showed awareness of the activities that helped them learn, moving from activities focusing on vocabulary to those involving oral production and a focus on form. Although these studies show that young learners are aware of the strategies they use in language learning, none focus on specific strategy use during peer interaction.

In the present study, learner beliefs in relation to peer oral interaction activities are investigated. Much research on the benefits of oral interaction from a cognitive perspective is based on the work of Long (1996) who claimed that the negotiation of meaning which resulted when communication problems occurred, led to learners obtaining comprehensible input and subsequent learning. Studies by Oliver (1995, 1998, 2002, 2009) have shown that young learners in English as a second language contexts are able to cooperatively engage in conversational interaction, negotiate for meaning, and benefit from their own output and the input and feedback they received. More recent research in an EFL setting has shown similar results (García Mayo & Agirre, 2016; García Mayo & Lázaro Ibarrola, 2015). Other researchers studying interaction from a sociocultural perspective have demonstrated that learners are able to use a variety of scaffolding strategies to support one another's language production. The results of Gagné and Parks (2013) with grade 6 ESL learners showed learners were able to use a range of scaffolding strategies, including requests for assistance and other correction, but negotiation of meaning strategies were rare. It is clear then that peer interaction can lead to learning opportunities. In this study, interaction is viewed from the perspective of the young learner in order to explore their feelings and beliefs in relation to learning, with the aim of discussing how these insights can inform classroom practices.

Methodology

In Portugal, English is a foreign language and learners in years 3 and 4 in primary education study the language for 2 hours per week. Although course objectives (Cravo, Bravo & Duarte, 2015) state that speaking has a privileged position in the classroom, when faced with large classes, teachers often resort to more traditional pedagogical practices, where learners have few opportunities to orally interact in pairs or groups, and lessons are more teacher-centred in nature. The present study was carried out in a private school and involved 41 learners in two year 4 classes (9-10 year olds).

Here lessons closely followed the coursebook, and although the pedagogical approach in class was communicative, learners rarely engaged in information gap pair-work activities. The learners' level of English was A1, based on results of class tests.

After requesting consent from students, parents, and school directors, learners were asked to take part in a total of 3 spot-the-difference tasks, designed by the English teacher in collaboration with the researcher, to reflect the language being studied in class. Learners were randomly paired, and the speaking tasks were part of regular teaching activities. The tasks, which were completed over a three week period, took on average 4-5 minutes to complete and the objective was to find 6 differences.

A questionnaire, written in Portuguese, was distributed immediately after the third oral task, as beliefs can change over time and vary depending on classroom practices. It was therefore considered important that the questionnaire was distributed as soon after the final oral tasks as possible. It consisted of 4 closed statements and asked learners to indicate on a 3 points scale to what extent they agreed with these statements. It was distributed in class, and also included 4 open questions. Results of closed questions are expressed as percentages, and responses to open questions were assigned to different categories, following an iterative process, and subsequently expressed as percentages.

Results and implications for the classroom

In this section the answers to the questionnaire are presented and implications for the classroom are discussed.

Item 1: I enjoyed doing the oral tasks

Item 2: Why/Why not?

a. 80% of learners stated they liked the spot-the-difference oral activities with the remaining 20% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Just under 40% stated they enjoyed the tasks because they were fun.

As mentioned by one student:

Porque é uma forma gira de brincar com o inglês

Because it's a fun way to play with English

Halliwell (1992, p. 6) mentions children's "instinct for play and fun", adding that games create a real reason to communicate. These spot-the-difference tasks allowed learners to use language creatively to complete a game-like activity; game-like as it had a set of rules, required learners to reach a non-language related objective and had an eventual winner (Read, 2007). Such games not only encourage positive attitudes towards the language and increase learner talking time, but are also an important tool which allow children to understand their world and provide an authentic context for meaningful language practice (Lewis & Bedson, 1999). However teachers can be reluctant to use games in class, or at times use them as a reward for good behaviour, as they worry they may lead to excessive noise and unruly behaviour. This is especially true in educational systems where learners have few opportunities to work with a partner, and lessons are traditionally teacher-centred. However, games should have a central role in the young learner classroom as they are an ideal context for indirect learning and real language use (Halliwell, 1992). It is important to highlight the pedagogical value of games to learners before they are played, as this will help encourage them to use the target language and stay on task. Helping children understand the learning objective of an activity can also raise children's awareness of learning to learn, leading to more effective learning (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015).

b. Approximately 40% of participants mentioned how the tasks improved learning, with one learner stating:

Porque em todas as atividades, aprendi alguma coisa

In all the activities I learned something

For primary learners, these games "are a central part of the process of getting hold of the language" (Halliwell 1992), and the enjoyment gained has also been found to mediate learning (Swain 2013). Games may provide an opportunity for learners to engage in meaningful repetition of chunks of language, but can also create the need for them to use language creatively and encourage them to construct utterances to convey their own thoughts and ideas, creating new language, which is then internalised and can later be used autonomously. During interaction, learners can use the corrective feedback provided by their partner, and also have the opportunity to self-correct (Oliver & Philp, 2014), thereby promoting language awareness.

c. Others students mentioned they enjoyed the social aspect of the activities, not only the fact that they could work with a partner rather than complete work individually, but also that they could use their partner as a resource. One learner mentioned:

Porque podíamos falar com os outros colegas e podíamos espremer dúvidas com eles.

Because we can talk to our classmates and discuss doubts with them.

Peer interaction is beneficial as it is an anxiety-free environment where learners feel more comfortable to experiment with language. It also provides an opportunity to adopt different conversational roles when compared to teacher-fronted communication, such as questioning and self or other correction. Peers can also be used as resources, and here both learners may benefit, as explaining something may help the 'expert' understand better (Oliver & Philp, 2014). Most importantly however, talking to your peers in class is fun!

d. Some learners mentioned the novelty value of the activity saying it was different and something they didn't usually do in class. Despite being accepted that using the target language for interaction is necessary for learning to take place, results from a global survey of practices in primary English classes showed that the most commonly mentioned classroom practice was repeating after the teacher (Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011). It has already been mentioned that teachers often avoid pair and group work as they worry about excessive noise and off-task behaviour. Another potential drawback could be the use of L1 in monolingual classes. To ensure that peer interaction activities are effective in the classroom, teachers should make certain learners know the purpose of the activity, that instructions are clear and that noise levels are controlled using noise level charts, which are widely available on the internet

e. Others learners mentioned enjoying the speaking activity because they had greater difficulty in writing in English. This reminds us that although the pressures of traditional paper and pencil assessment often means teachers spend more time on reading and writing, young learners' literacy skills in L1 are still developing in primary education and they often find it easier to communicate through speaking and listening. (Cameron, 2001). For this reason, teachers should emphasise oral rather than literacy skills, which should be assessed formatively using teacher, self and peer assessment of classroom speaking tasks. Teachers should also respect learners' differing learning styles and ensure lessons include a balanced variety of skills work.

f. Some, however expressed reservations, mentioning:

Fico nervosa e com medo de falar mal.

I get nervous because I'm afraid I'll make a mistake.

The role of the teacher in creating a positive, collaborative classroom atmosphere where learners feel safe to make mistakes and ask for help is important for the success of peer oral interaction activities. Teachers should also take the opportunity to give learners positive feedback at the end of an activity, and the role of encouragement and appropriate praise in motivating learners cannot be underestimated. It is also important that the teacher closely monitors the activity, and ensures that learners are carefully paired, as Oliver et al., (2017) suggest that the success of learning during young learner peer interaction could be dependent on how they relate to each other, with those exhibiting greater engagement with each other's contributions and an equal degree of control over the task being more likely to learn from such activities (Storch, 2002). Teachers should be aware that primary learners' emotions are an important factor in learning, and cannot be ignored in the language learning classroom.

Item 3: I think the oral tasks helped me learn.

Item 4: What did you learn from the oral tasks?

a. The majority of students (88%) agreed with this statement and when asked to provide more detail on what they believed they learned, 37% mentioned they learned to communicate better in English, with others pointing to the fact that peer interaction helped develop their social skills.

A falar melhor inglês e a respeitar os outros

To speak English better and respect others

Halliwell (1992, p. 8) states that "Children need to talk. Without talking they cannot become good at it", so it is hardly surprising that over a third of students claimed that the practice provided by oral tasks helped improve their speaking. However, for most children, the social goals of establishing and maintaining friendships in the classroom are more important than the teacher's linguistic goals (Philp & Duchesne, 2008). Peer interaction affords primary learners the opportunity to develop collaborative skills such as turn taking and listening to the opinions of others, while working with peers who are at a similar stage of development. Self-reflection showed these learners were aware of this social aspect of interaction.

b. 24% claimed they learned more vocabulary.

There is no doubt that without vocabulary, oral communication is impossible and previous studies have shown the importance of vocabulary in primary children's language learning. Kolb (2014) demonstrated how the primary learners she studied believed that language learning was equivalent to accumulating vocabulary, and the aim of communication was to increase vocabulary knowledge. Similarly Muñoz (2014) found that grade 3 students rated vocabulary activities most highly when asked which activities helped them learn most.

c. 22% said the tasks helped them make sentences.

Eu com as atividades aprendi a estruturar frases e a comunicar em inglês bem melhor

I learned to make sentences and to communicate much better in English

This belief is inexorably linked to the previous belief on vocabulary, but when the majority of lessons are based around the presentation and practice of individual words, learners have few opportunities to combine these elements to build up longer utterances which help them convey meaning, improve fluency and satisfy their previously mentioned need to 'show what you know'. Learners will only be able to combine these individual elements if given the opportunity to do so through more challenging communicative tasks, especially in EFL classrooms where learners have little contact with the language either inside or outside school. This difficulty is also discussed in Muñoz's study (2014) on young EFL learners in Spain, who similarly struggled to develop their language beyond the single-word level.

d. Interaction, however, was not a positive experience for all learners, and two learners declared they had learned nothing from the experience. This could be a result of the task being too easy or too difficult, and teachers need to carefully design speaking tasks which are age and level appropriate. In addition, it is important that learners have a real need to interact, and activities ideally should have an information gap, which obliges learners to exchange information in order to complete the task successfully.

Item 5: I helped my partners during the oral tasks

Item 6: How did you help your partners during the oral tasks?

a. In the present study approximately three quarters of learners recognized they gave and received help from their partners during the tasks, and when asked how they supported each other's language production, 65% mentioned supplying vocabulary. This is in agreement with the fact that many students also believed they themselves learned mostly vocabulary from the tasks.

b. 22% mentioned helping others form sentences, translating and correcting, and 10% explaining when their partner didn't understand. Some learners mentioned answering questions, giving hints and advice, and some were specific as

to how they supported their partner's language learning. As mentioned by two learners:

Ajudei dizendo a primeira silaba da palavra que faltava

I helped by saying the first syllable of the missing word

Dizendo o início das frases e eles acabavam

Saying the beginning of the sentence and they finished

Co-construction occurs when one learner stops speaking, and the other provides either a syllable, word or phrase to help their partner complete their utterance. This strategy is often used by teachers to support language production, so it is interesting to see how learners are aware of using similar strategies to support each other.

Item 7: My partners helped me during the oral tasks.

Item 8: How did your partners help you during the oral tasks?

74% of learners agreed that their partner helped them during the oral activities, 19% neither agreed nor disagreed and 2 learners disagreed. Most noted that their classmates helped them by supplying vocabulary (33%), by supplying a translation (14%) or by answering questions or offering an explanation (16%). Oral interaction tasks not only provide much needed oral practice, but they also encourage learners to become more confident speakers when they realise they can have a conversation without the support of the teacher, and that they are capable of mutually supporting each other. They take the focus off the teacher and promote a learner-centred classroom.

Although some teachers believe that primary children are too young to reflect on their learning, this questionnaire refutes this belief. These learners recognised that learning could take place during the tasks, with most mentioning they learned new vocabulary, and commenting that the practice provided led to better communication skills. In addition, they were aware of giving and receiving support during the tasks using a variety of strategies such as translation, co-construction, peer–repair, answering questions and explaining. Unfortunately, despite having fun competing the spot-the-difference activities, it was clear they had few opportunities to interact orally with classmates on a regular basis.

Conclusion

This study showed that the majority of learners enjoyed the oral tasks and were aware of the strategies they used to give and receive support for language production, with many of the strategies mentioned corresponding to those noted in the literature (Gagné and Parks, 2013; Oliver et al., 2017). As learners' beliefs in relation to what and how they learn can influence their behaviour (Cotterall, 1999), it is important that teachers take these beliefs into consideration. When learner and teacher beliefs are at odds, for example when learners

do not understand the need for pair or group work in the primary English class, due to the influence of other school subjects, where they work individually, Kolb (2014) suggests that beliefs should be discussed in class "to prevent a mismatch between teachers' and learners' notions, cater for individual learning needs and enlarge students' choice of learning strategies" (2014, p.239).

Giving learners the opportunity to reflect on what and how they learn through classroom activities on a regular basis will give them a greater understanding of their learning, help them monitor their progress, which could improve motivation. Although many coursebooks include self-assessment sections at the end of units, Ellis and Ibrahim (2015) suggest that reviewing learning should occur on a more regular basis, and believe learners need guidance on the purpose of these type of activities. They suggest that reviewing can take place at the beginning of a lesson, to connect the content of previous lessons to the current one, during the lesson, to highlight how activities promote learning and how the stages are interlinked, and at the end of the lesson, to raise awareness of what the students can do and how they learned. They suggest systematically and explicitly integrating learning to learn activities into classes by asking questions such as "What did you do? What did you learn? How did you learn? How well did you do? and What do you

need to do next?" (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015, p.41), and argue that this will help create optimum learning and teaching conditions.

This raises the possibility of training learners to use the strategies necessary to create learning opportunities during peer interaction. Sato and Lyster (2012) found that after corrective feedback training, measures of accuracy and fluency improved significantly amongst Japanese EFL learners, and Sato (2013) reported that training improved learners' trust in their partner as a learning resource. Nonetheless, more research is required to clarify how useful explicit training in conversational interaction between primary EFL learners could be.

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